

## Message Text

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PAGE 01 BRUSSE 05289 01 OF 02 131223Z

43

ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 PM-03 NSC-05 SP-02 SS-15 L-03 PRS-01

CIAE-00 INR-07 NSAE-00 DODE-00 OMB-01 EB-07 MC-02

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FM AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4167

INFO AMEMBASSY ANKARA

AMEMBASSY ATHENS

AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN

AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE

AMEMBASSY LISBON

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY LUXEMBOURG

AMEMBASSY OSLO

AMEMBASSY OTTAWA

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY REYKJAVIK

AMEMBASSY ROME

AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM

USMISSION NATO

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BRUSSELS 05289

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: MASS, PINT, BE

SUBJECT: F-104 REPLACEMENT DRAMA EXPOSES VULNERABILITY OF  
TINDEMANS GOVERNMENT

SUMMARY. THE F-10 REPLACEMENT DRAMA, WHICH COULD BE SUBTITLED  
TINDEMANS' PURGATORY, THREW INTO SHARP RELIEF CONSTRAINTS UNDER  
WHICH ANY BELGIAN GOVERNMENT MUST OPERATE AND SPECIFICALLY EXPOSED  
THE VULNERABILITY OF THE TINDEMANS GOVERNMENT. BY THE EXPEDIENT  
OF CONVERTING THE LWF AIRCRAFT BUY INTO A POINT OF CONTENTIION  
BETWEEN BELGIUM'S FRENCH- AND DUTCH-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES,  
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PAGE 02 BRUSSE 05289 01 OF 02 131223Z

TINDEMANS' ADVERSARIES PUSHED THE PRIME MINISTER OFF THE STATEMAN'S

PEDESTAL AND FORCED HIM TO WHEEL AND DEAL IN THE SWEATY  
POLITICAL ARENA. TINDEMANS REMAINS A BRIGHT FIGURE LIKELY TO REMAIN  
AT OR NEAR STAGE FRONT IN BELGIAN POLITICS FOR A GOOD MANY YEARS.  
BUT HIS GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN SHOWN TO HAVE ONLY TENUOUS CONTROL OVER  
ITS FATE. END SUMMARY

1. PRIME MINISTER LEO TINDEMANS FINALLY HAD HIS WAY THIS WEEK  
ON "THE ARMS DEAL OF THE CENTURY". HE GOADED HIS RELUCTANT  
COALITION CABINET INTO CHOOSING THE AMERICAN F-16 LIGHTWEIGHT  
FIGHTER TO REPLACE BELGIUM'S OBSOLESCE F-104 FLEET, AND HE  
SURVIVED A SUBSEQUENT OPPOSITION NO-CONFIDENCE MOTION IN  
PARLIAMENT. BUT THERE IS NO REJOICING IN THE PRIME MINISTER'S  
OFFICE. FOR THE PRICE OF A VICTORY WAS EXPOSURE OF THE WEAKNESS  
OF THE YEAR-OLD TINDEMANS GOVERNMENT.

2. THE PRIME MINISTER (WE ARE AUTHORITATIVELY TOLD) MADE UP HIS  
MIND FOR THE F-16 THREE MONTHS AGO. A SOLID MAJORITY OF HIS  
MINISTERS WERE OF LIKE MIND. YET HE WAS COMPELLED TO ENGAGE FOR  
WEEKS IN FILIBUSTERING MANEUVERS - TO THE GREAT ANNOYANCE OF  
BELGIUM'S PARTNERS IN THE FOUR-NATION REPLACEMENT CONSORTIUM - AND  
TO PERMIT UNNECESSARY HAGGLING WITH THE USG OVER DETAILS OF THE  
TERMS OF ACQUISITION. EVEN THEN HE HAD NO CHOICE IN THE END BUT TO  
PUT THE LIFE OF HIS GOVERNMENT ON THE LINE TO FORCE THE CABINET  
TO ACT. THE AIRCRAFT ACQUISITION DRAMA POINTS UP SHARPLY THE  
CONSTRAINTS UNDER WHICH THIS, OR ANY, BELGIAN GOVERNMENT MUST  
WORK UNDER AT THIS MOMENT IN HISTORY. AND IT DEMONSTRATED THAT  
LEO TINDEMANS, ONE OF THE FEW EUROPEAN LEADERS RECENTLY TO EMERGE  
WITH THE LOOK OF STATESMEN ABOUT THEM, HAS A LONG WAY TO GO  
TO ACHIEVE A DOMINATING POSITION IN THE ARENA OF BYZANTINE  
BELGIAN POLITICS.

3. TINDEMANS' POLITICAL WEAKNESS DERIVES FROM THE FAMILIAR  
DIVISION OF BELGIUM INTO FRENCH-AND DUTCH-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES.  
THE "COMMUNITIES PROBLEM" CLIMAXED IN THE LATE 1960'S WHEN  
THE LONG-AGGRIEVED FLEMISH COMMUNITY ACHIEVED ITS GOALS OF  
EQUAL STATUS WITH FRANCOPHONE BELGIANS. SUBSEQUENT CLASHES  
ON THE COMMUNITIES FRONT HAVE TURNED ON HOW TO IMPLEMENT  
ACCEPTED PRINCIPLES. EMPLOYING TACTICS OF COMPROMISE AND  
DELAY, TINDEMANS, A FLEMING WHO DOES NOT SET WALLOON TEETH  
ON EDGE, HAS HAD SOME SUCCESS IN FRUSTRATING THE EITHER-OR  
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PAGE 03 BRUSSE 05289 01 OF 02 131223Z

EXTREMISTS. BUT SUCH TACTICS CANNOT OBSCURE AN OBJECTIVE  
SITUATION DEEPLY DISTURBING TO FRANCOPHONE BELGIANS: EQUAL  
RIGHTS ON A SIMPLE ONE-MAN, ONE-VOTE BASIS TRANSLATES INTO  
POLITICAL HEGEMONY FOR THE 55-PLUS PERCENT OF BELGIANS WHO  
SPEAK DUTCH OVER THEIR BREAKFAST COFFEE. SINCE FLANDERS,  
WHERE BELGIUM'S POSTWAR INDUSTRIAL BOOM CENTERED, ALSO INCREASINGLY  
DOMINATES THE BELGIAN ECONOMY, WALLOONS SEE THEMSELVES THREATENED  
WITH THE KIND OF DISCRIMINATION FLEMINGS ONCE LABORED UNDER.

HOWEVER DECENT A FELLOW TINDEMANS MIGHT BE, FRANCOPHONES TEND TO REGARD BELGIUM AS GOVERNED TODAY BY A POWER-THIRSTY CLIQUE OF FLEMISH POLS.

4. THERE IS SOME JUSTIFICATION FOR THIS BELIEF. THE TINDEMANS COALITION LINEUP HOLDS 115 SEATS, OR AN EIGHT-VOTE MAJORITY IN THE LOWER HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT. OF THE 115, NEARLY TWO-THIRDS, 71, ARE OCCUPIED BY DUTCH-SPEAKERS. THE HARD CORE OF THE COALITION IS TINDEMANS' OWN FLEMISH SOCIAL CHRISTIAN PARTY (CVP) WHICH HOLDS 50 SEATS. THE POLITICAL CENTER OF GRAVITY IN BELGIUM TODAY IS CERTAINLY IN FLANDERS. HOWEVER, FLANDERS' STRENGTH IS ALSO THE GOVERNMENT'S WEAKNESS. THE FRENCH SOCIAL CHRISTIAN PARTY (PSC) HAS NOTHING LIKE THE SIZE AND PRESTIGE IN WALLONIA THAT ITS SISTER PARTY, CVP, HAS IN FLANDERS. THE TWO SMALL FRANCOPHONE PARTIES WHICH TINDEMANS COAXED INTO HIS COALITION WOULD BE OF MINOR INTEREST EXCEPT THAT THE PRIME MINISTER NEEDS THE HANDFUL OF VOTES OF BOTH TO MAKE A MAJORITY. ONE OF THEM, THE RASSEMBLEMENT WALLOON (13 SEATS), HAS NO DOCTRINE BUT TO DEFEND WALLOON INTERESTS AGAINST ALL COMERS. IT BELATEDLY JOINED THE GOVERNMENT ONLY BECAUSE IT FELT IT COULD FULFILL ITS MISSION AS WELL OR BETTER FROM WITHIN. IT ACKNOWLEDGES LOYALTY NEITHER TO THE PERSON NOR TO THE POLICIES OF PRIME MINISTER TINDMANS.

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PAGE 01 BRUSSE 05289 02 OF 02 131225Z

43

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CIAE-00 INR-07 NSAE-00 DODE-00 OMB-01 MC-02 TRSE-00

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 BRUSSELS 05289

5. THE SHAKY TINDEMANS COALITION SURVIVED A YEAR WITHOUT RUNNING INTO SERIOUS TROUBLE. IT DID SO BY AVOIDING OR COMPROMISING ISSUES THAT COULD ESCALATE INTO SHOWDOWN POLICY QUESTIONS. BUT THE F-104 REPLACEMENT DECISION BECAME BOTH BIG AND UNAVOIDABLE AND IT NEARLY DID THE GOVERNMENT IN. TINDEMANS, TRYING TO HANDLE THE AIRCRAFT REPLACEMENT AS A TECHNICAL QUESTION, WAS CAUGHT APPARENTLY UNAWARE WHEN IN MARCH IT SUDDENLY SURFACED AS A COMMUNITIES ISSUE. IT WAS PROBABLY DEFENSE MINISTER VANDEN BOEYNANTS, FAST RUNNING OUT OF ARGUEMENTS FOR THE FRENCH ENTRY IN THE REPLACEMENT SWEEPSTAKES, WHO WAS INSPIRED TO MAKE ADVOCACY OF THE MIRAGE A FRANCOPHONE CAUSE.  
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PAGE 02 BRUSSE 05289 02 OF 02 131225Z

IN A MATTER OF DAYS TINDEMANS' MINISTERS WERE ALMOST PRECISELY ALIGNED:  
FRANCOPHONE/MIRAGE - DUTCH-SPEAKING/F-16. IT TOOK THE PRIME MINISTER TWO MONTHS OF ELABORATE EFFORT TO CONVINCE HIS FRANCOPHONE MINISTERS THAT TO CHOOSE THE FRENCH AIRCRAFT WAS JUST NOT FEASIBLE. IN THE END EVEN VANDEN BOEYNANTS ACCEPTED THE INEVITABLE. THE LAST AND MOST DANGEROUS HOLDOUTS WERE THE SMALL BAND OF WALLOON MILITANTS, FOR WHOM REASON DOES NOT COUNT MUCH. ONLY A DIP INTO THE GOVERNMENT'S PORT BARREL PLUS TINDEMANS' EXPLICIT THREAT TO SADDLE THE RASSEMBLEMENT WALLOON WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR TOPPLING HIS GOVERNMENT - IN THE CONTEXT OF BELGIAN POLITICS AN ALL BUT SUICIDAL ACT FOR RW - SUFFICED TO BREAK THEIR RESISTANCE.

6. IF RW HAD JUMPED OFF THE CLIFF, THE NEXT BELGIAN GOVERNMENT MIGHT WELL HAVE BEEN FORMED BY TINDEMANS - EITHER A MINORITY COALITION OR A BIG COALITION WITH PARTICIPATION OF THE BELGIAN SOCIALIST PARTY. IN EITHER CASE, TINDEMANS WOULD BE HARD PUT TO RUN A STRONG GOVERNMENT. POLICIES WOULD BE COMPROMISES NEGOTIATED WITH RIVALS AND ADVERSARIES, EITHER OUTSIDE THE COALITION IN THE FIRST INSTANCE OR INSIDE THE COALITION IN THE SECOND. AND THE PRIME MINISTER WOULD ALWAYS BE VULNERABLE TO SUDDEN FORMATION OF A COMBINATION DIRECTED AGAINST HIM. THAT IS TO SAY THAT THE F-104 REPLACEMENT CRISIS DEMONSTRATED THAT BELGIAN POLITICS REMAIN PRETTY MUCH WHAT THEY HAVE BEEN IN THE PAST DECADE: A NON-STOP CONTEST WITH DISPARATE INTERESTS CEASE-

LESSLY COMBINING AND RE-COMBINING AND ONLY EXTREMISTS OF THE  
RIGHT OR LEFT EXCLUDED FROM THE GAME.

7. AS FOR TINDEMANS PERSONAL PROSPECTS, HE IS AN ADEPT  
POLITICIAN WHO PLAYS THE BELGIAN GAME WELL. HE WILL NO DOUBT  
BE A LEADING FIGURE ON THE NATIONAL SCENE FOR A DECADE OR MORE.  
BUT HIS SHADOW SEEMS TO BE JUST A BIT SHORTER TODAY. JUST  
BEFORE THE AIRCRAFT REPLACEMENT CRISIS FLARED, TINDEMANS, THE  
BELGIAN LEADER, WAS MUCH PUBLICIZED IN THE WORLD PRESS, CONFERRING  
WITH MAO, CONSULTING WITH GISCARD, DINING WITH PRESIDENT FORD.  
HE WAS THE COMMON MARKET'S "WISE MAN" AND FAST BECOMING A  
RECOGNIZED FIGURE ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE. ALL THAT REMAINS  
TRUE. BUT A HANDFUL OF ALMOST ANONYMOUS WALLOON POLITICIANS  
HAVE DEMONSTRATED ANOTHER TRUTH: BACK HOME IN BELGIUM LEO  
TINDEMANS, PROFESSIONAL POLITICIAN, HAS TO WORK HARD JUST TO  
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PAGE 03 BRUSSE 05289 02 OF 02 131225Z

KEEP HIS JOB. FIRESTONE

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## Message Attributes

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